



MdWg Directorate of Safety

DRIVING EMERGENCIES

You're behind the wheel of your car, driving at a brisk clip on the open highway. Suddenly, a car from the opposite traffic lane swerves directly into your lane and speeds toward you on a collision course.

Would you know what to do? Or would you panic? Would you do the wrong thing, or would you choose the right defensive action to put the odds in your favor?

Emergency situations are a threat anytime you're at the wheel of your car. A panic reaction could be disastrous. Your very survival may depend on two things, your ability to stay calm, and your knowledge of the best defensive action to take. Obviously you can't "practice" an emergency-driving situation. So the next best thing is to develop the skill and know-how before hand in you mind. You must visualize in advance emergencies that might confront you, and plan mentally the defensive action you will take. You can do this by studying the advice of the experts.

You may ask, where do I find the advice of these experts? Your base safety office has a course to help you defend yourself from driving emergencies. This course is called the American Automobile Association (AAA) Driver Improvement Program. The program will help you fix in your mind what you should do, before an emergency happens, because if you drive long enough you will have some emergency happen.

The following emergencies are the kind that have happened to others and could happen to you. Would you know what to do?

Your Brakes Fail

You step on the brake and the pedal slaps uselessly on the floor. It's a terrifying experience!

If there is any resistance, pump the pedal. You may be able to work up enough pressure to help somewhat. If there is no pressure and the way is clear ahead, coast in drive gear and use the parking brake. If you need to slow faster, shift into lower forward gear and let engine compression help.

On a hill or mountain grade, you're in trouble. Look for something to sideswipe a roadside brush, a snowbank, a guardrail, even parked cars. (Dented sheet metal can be repaired.)

Use your horn or lights to warn other drivers and pedestrians that you are out of control.

You Go Into a Skid

Abrupt turns, sudden lane changes or hard braking can throw you into a skid, especially on wet or icy roads.

By using a little know-how, however, you can regain control. Here's what to do. Take your foot off the accelerator, but also keep it away from the brake pedal. Keep steering in the direction you wish to go until you get it lined back up. Avoid oversteering; otherwise you could easily fishtail in the opposite direction before you've regained control.

While trying to steer out of a skid, hold the steering wheel firmly. Usually just a few minor steering corrections, combined with taking and keeping your foot off the brake and accelerator pedals, will do it.

Your Accelerator Sticks

You let up on the gas pedal and nothing happens. Keep cool; this is one of the easiest emergencies to handle.

Try tapping the accelerator a few times to see if it will spring back to its normal position. Or try to pull the pedal up with the toe or your shoe - or have someone else reach down for it so your attention won't be taken from the road. If these techniques fail, shift into neutral and apply the brakes. Guide the car off the roadway if you can, once the car has come to a complete stop, turn off the ignition.

Once you've stopped in a safe place, try to find the problem. A few drops of lubricant from the dipstick might be used to lubricate the sticking part.

Remember to warn other motorists that your vehicle is stopped. Turn on the flashers. Raise the hood as a distress signal. Put flares or other approved warning devices 15 feet and 300 feet behind your car.

You Have A Blowout

Keep a firm and steady grip on the steering wheel, and don't oversteer to correct, swerve, or pull. If a front tire goes, there will be a strong pull toward the side with the blowout. A rear blowout tends to cause weaving of the rear end. Above all, don't slam on the brakes! Brake smoothly -- but easy does it. Sudden braking may throw you into a spin or out of control.

Get onto the shoulder and slow to a crawl until you find a place level enough to change the tire safely. A ruined tire is better than risking your life in a hazardous location. Day or night set out flares or other warning devices and turn on flashers.

Your Car Catches Fire

Although car fires are quite rare, a short circuit in the electrical system can cause a fire in the engine compartment. If you have a fire, pull off the road quickly, shut off the ignition to cut electrical power and get all passengers safely away from the car. Do not attempt to disconnect the battery cables to cut electrical power since this is difficult without tools and would probably take too long to do any good. If you have a type C fire extinguisher designed for electrical fires, carefully open the hood and put out the fire. Never jerk the hood open since this feeds oxygen to the fire. If you don't have the proper type extinguisher, you can try to smother the flames with a heavy blanket or coat or use the jack handle to carefully remove the burning wires. However, remember that fighting any fire can be dangerous, especially if you don't have the proper equipment. If the fire is beyond your control, get away from the vehicle and flag down help.

You Must Stop On A Highway

On an expressway with paved shoulders, signal and pull off at near-traffic speed, then slow down. Where the shoulder is unpaved, signal a right turn and slow down to a safe speed before turning off.

Leave low-beam headlights on in dusk, darkness or bad weather; also turn on interior lights and four-way flashers.

If you must stop close to a traffic lane, on a curve, over a hill or in any risky location, get everyone out of the car and well away from traffic. By all means, don't obscure taillights at night by standing or working behind the car.

Day or night place a flare or other warning device about 15 feet behind the car and another at least 300 feet back (that's about 120 paces.) Raise the hood and tie a white handkerchief to the antenna or traffic side door handle as a signal if you need help.

Your Hood Flies Up

Brake smoothly and ease onto the shoulder, you'll have to depend on the view from your left window for steering reference. Or on some cars you may be able to peek through the gap under the hinge of the hood. Make it a habit after a service station stop to glance at your hood to make sure it is securely latched and not ajar.

You Are On A Collision Course

Suddenly your blood chills! Another car is speeding toward you in your lane - a head on crash looms!

Is he drunk, asleep, ill, inattentive? No matter! You'll need to keep all your wits about you to avoid the worst of all highway mishaps.

Brake hard -- every mile you take off your speed reduces the impact force. Head for the right shoulder and give him the entire road. If there's time, lean on the horn and flash your lights.

If the vehicle continues toward you, take the ditch or any open ground to the right free of solid obstructions. Remember that any alternative, even a rollover, gives you a better chance than a head-on collision.

Whatever you do, don't try to outguess him and swerve to the left around him. He may recover at the last instant and instinctively veer back into his own lane-- and hit you head-on.

Your Car Plunges Into Water

Submersion is about the most unpredictable of all auto mishaps; both in the way the car will perform and the way people will react. Water causes more unreasoning panic than any other emergency.

A few tips have grown out of actual tests:

A car with windows and doors closed will float from 3 to 10 minutes. The best escape route is through a window. It is difficult to open a door against water pressure, but a window can be rolled down easily. Power windows may short out, so try to open them immediately. Tempered glass in the side and rear windows can be broken only with a heavy, hard object.

A front engine car will sink nose first, and some air may be pushed to the rear, near the roof. When pressure inside and out is equalized, it is easier to open a door.

Remember that 3 to 10 minutes is a lot of time in an emergency. If your safety belts are fastened so you won't be knocked out, and if you don't panic, there's usually time to escape.